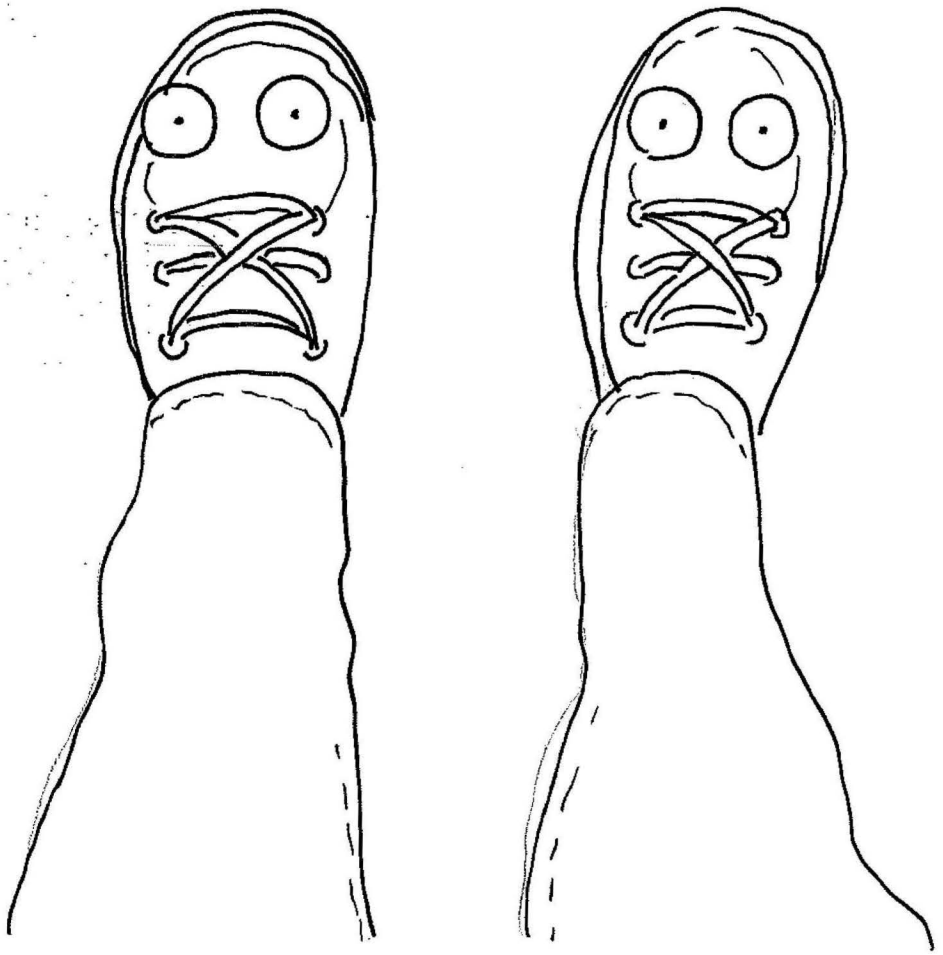
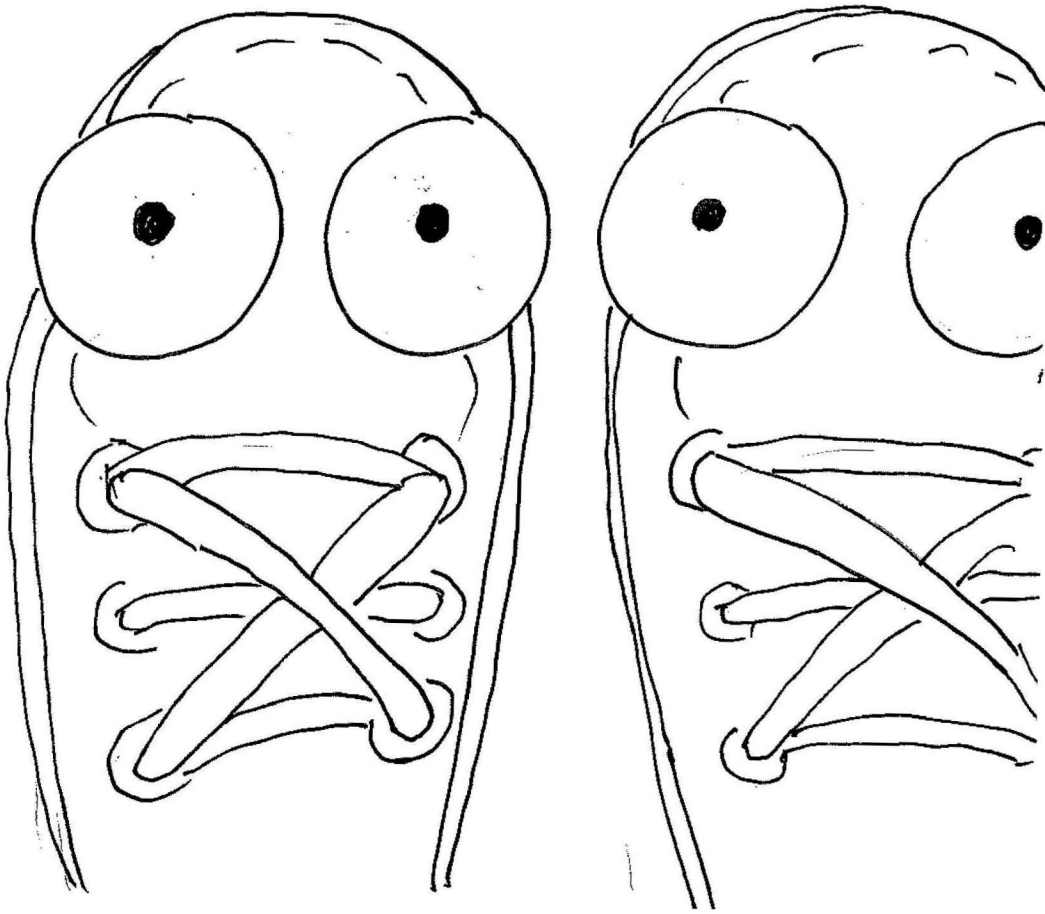




Chapter One: Lethbridge Spark

Detective Sally Lillycrop opened the door to the squad room and instinctively reached for her gun. That noise! Like the very air itself was crying out in agony. Her partner, Detective Marcus Thorpe, approached, hands raised to signify there was no danger. The look on his face, however, assured her there was plenty of nonsense going on. He nodded his chin towards the corner of the room where a weird man stood next to an even weirder contraption - what looked like an old CB radio with a five-foot antenna shooting out of one side and a loop of Dr. Frankenstein wire stuck out the other. The weird man was spastically playing his hands around the antenna and over the loop. And this, apparently, was the cause behind the awful sound filling the squad room.

"Errr?" Lillycrop asked.

"It's a Theremin," Thorpe answered.

"Yo! Theremin!" Lillycrop shouted across the room. "Turn that thing off!"

The weird man ignored her, continued moving his hands around the contraption while every other officer and staff member in the room looked embarrassed to be there.

"No," Thorpe explained, taking her arm and leading her away. "His name is Lethbridge Spark. What he's doing is playing a Theremin."

"Well why doesn't somebody arrest him?"

Marcus Thorpe sighed. By now they had moved down the hall and were standing in front of an office. He pointed at the name on the door: Captain Moser.

"Errrr," Lillycrop grumbled.

***

"And I've been thinking long and hard about which actor should play me when it comes time to film the TV series… Ben Gazzara." Captain Moser said with a smile.

"He's dead," Lillycrop snapped.

Captain Moser's smile faltered.

"Anyway, what's all this got to do with us?" Lillycrop demanded. She'd just sat through 45 minutes of Captain Moser explaining why he'd hired some British Detective named Lethbridge Spark to work in their squad room because the BBC had done a highly successful TV series based on his exploits and the Captain was betting that Hollywood would want to do an Americanized version of that show.

And Captain Moser really, truly enjoyed those crime shows on television.

"Dead? Really?" Captain Moser made a 'tch' sound. "I'll have to think of someone else…."

Lillycrop snapped her fingers in the Captain's face. "Earth to Captain! Come in, Captain!."

“Ah, Lillycrop,” the Captain turned his attention towards her. “My ace in the hole. You’re a very lucky young lady, you know.”

“Oh no.” The realization suddenly dawned on her. “No no no. Marcus is my partner. We’ve been partners for years!”

“All the more reason for a change. Liven things up. Make things more…. Dramatic.” Lillycrop could tell the Captain was just barely containing his ‘jazz hands’.

“No,” she repeated.

“In the BBC show,” Captain continued, “Spark’s partner was a St. Bernard. Big ol’ thing, brandy keg collar, the whole nine. And you, my lucky dear, are the human equivalent of a St. Bernard – aggressive, feisty, and not afraid to step over the line for justice; even if the law says you shouldn’t.”

Detective Thorpe cleared his throat. “Actually St. Bernards are quite passive.” He said. “Gentle and compassionate. Not like Lillycrop at all.”

“Well, you can’t deny that Lillycrop is very attractive and has that unique quality where men want to be with her and women want to be like her. Very much like a St. Bernard.”

“That’s not…. No, that’s not right either,” Thorpe said.

“And you shouldn’t complain,” Captain Moser turned to Detective Thorpe. “I’m teaming you with Rock Maxstone. I rather expect you two can come up with some steamy, romantic subplots.”

“What!”

“Gay relationships are hot now.”

“I’m not gay!”

“Really? I thought….” Captain Moser swept fingers across his upper lip.

“My mustache?”

“Hm. I assumed, because of the mustache….”

“I’ve been married to the same woman for twenty years! I have a grandchild!”

“Doesn’t mean anything when you’re on the downlow.”

“The mustache? Really?” Thorpe pulled on it. “Really?”

Lillycrop slammed her fist on the table. “You can’t do this!”

“It is already done,” Captain Moser said, putting enough steel in his voice to reminder her who was boss.

“But….” Lillycrop sat back. She looked desperately at Thorpe who had pushed out his upper lip and was studying it with downturned eyes.

“Peter Falk,” Captain Moser said, “was much more than just Columbo. Yes, Peter Falk might be able to play me.”

“…dead….” Lillycrop sighed.

“Excuse me?” The Captain said.

“Peter Falk is dead too.”

“Oh? How sad.”

Lillycrop stood up. She tugged the back of Thorpe’s shirt collar, and he joined her.

“You know who has range? Unexpected Range?” Captain Moser asked no-one in particular. “Judd Nelson.”

Lillycrop looked to Thorpe who just shrugged.

“Judd Nelson….” The Captain tented his fingers and turned his chair to look out the window.

The Detectives took their cue to leave.

***

The giant robot had just closed the spaceship door, and the flying saucer spun its way into outer space as earthlings gawked with wonder.

Or at least that what it sounded like in the squad room as Spark’s Theremin recital came to an end.

“Satisfactory,” he said as the last eerie note vibrated around the room before fading into silence.

Lillycrop thought otherwise. Indeed, she couldn’t think of anything less satisfactory than that lanky, unkempt weirdo with his extravagant mop of shaggy grey hair and round-rimmed glasses. And his nose! It was as big and sharp as the business end of a carpenter’s axe. She decided there and then that the ratings would have to be in the toilet before she’d ever become romantically involved with her new partner.

“You Spark?” she asked, standing in front of him with her hands on her hips.

Lethbridge considered her with a grunt and an arched eyebrow. The way he looked down his nose at her made Lillycrop feel hostile, but then she realized that he pretty much had to look down his nose at everything.

“You must be my driver,” Spark said. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“No. I’m your partner. I don’t know what the Captain promised you when you got hired, but we don’t get chauffeurs in this department.”

Lethbridge looked away. His eyes started to water. “I’ve only had one partner in my life,” he said with a broken voice. “His name was Bolivar and he was the best…. he was… sublime.” A perfectly round tear formed and started the long trek down the side of his nose.

“Wait… Bolivar? Was that the St. Bernard?”

Lethbridge choked back a sob. He gave a brief nod of his head. The tear, which had been quivering on the tip of his beak, broke free and fell to the linoleum floor with an audible ‘plunk’.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me,” Lillycrop said, looking over her shoulder, fully expecting someone to be recording this as a joke.

“You will drive,” Spark snapped, his melancholia gone just as fast as it appeared. “Combustible engines upset my aesthetics. Come! Come boy! We have a murder to investigate. We must away!”

He strode across the room with legs that would seem more graceful on an insect. Lillycrop could only watch as papers and empty Styrofoam cups flew off desks as he zipped past. When he reached the door, he turned and looked at her standing there in the corner.

“Well?” he said. “Come on.” He reached down and patted his thighs. “Come on, boy!” He puckered his lips and made kissy sounds.

“Errr.” Lillycrop said. She put her hand on her gun.

***

“I agree with the Captain that I should no longer call you ‘boy’,” Lethbridge Spark eye-swept her torso. “Obviously. Still, I see no reason for you to be offended. I am treating you exactly like I did my last partner. You should be flattered. He was…. Magnificent.”

Lillycrop ignored him, staring intently at the road. She was driving on the way to a murder investigation at the University. As a distraction, she turned on the radio – a country station.

“Never!” Spark immediately shut the radio off. “I will not subject myself to such pollution! And you should be ashamed of yourself for listening to that rubbish. Bad! Bad… partner…girl….” His voice trailed off as he realized what he was saying.

Lillycrop started a mental file-folder in her head. The tag on the folder read “hostile work environment lawsuit”. Next to it she mentally added a series of green dollar signs.

***

The corpse looked bad. Very bad. Terrible, in fact. An elaborately detailed medieval sword stuck out of his chest and there were a series of ten to twelve bullet holes surrounding that sword. The corpse’s arms were outstretched, hands clawing air; eyes bulging, tongue stuck out as if blowing a raspberry.

Absolutely gruesome.

Lillycrop blew wind and shook her head. The crime scene was an impressively equipped scientific laboratory – many tables cluttered with beakers and vials and burners that hissed and popped, steam rising here and there. Computer stations lined the walls. Next to her, Spark stood still as a statue, only his grey, deeply set eyes moved constantly, taking in every detail, every speck of dust.

“Crime of passion,” Lillycrop determined. “We should go talk to his family, friends, business associates…. Girlfriends.”

“Oh, Spencer was quite the loner,” Doctor Graebel offered. He was the Dean of the Science Department and had been the one who’d brought them to the lab which was now in the process of being locked down and scoured for evidence. “I’m certain he had no girlfriends.” The doctor snorted when he said that, like a true geek.

“Did you know him well?” Lillycrop asked.

“Enough to know he wasn’t very social. He never left this lab. I mean, literally, he never left this lab.”

“Did he ever have visitors? Phone calls? Did you ever see him engage with anybody through email or social networks?

Doctor Graebel shook his head. “No. He did nothing but research. Maybe he slept. I don’t know. I’m not exaggerating. He never left this lab.”

“Well,” Lillycrop winced. “Somehow or another he found a way to piss somebody off big time. You really must hate a guy to do all that.” She waved a hand at the corpse.

“Wrong!” Spark exclaimed. “This man was poisoned. A victim of my arch-nemesis, the mad poisoner, Professor D’eraj! This murder was cold and calculated, with a purpose more sinister and devious than you could ever imagine.”

Lillycrop gave it a few moments then said, “Poisoned?”

“Indeed! And we’re wasting precious time. Professor D’eraj has followed me here, to America, and he has one thing only on his mind – the utter destruction of all humanity! We must find him before it is too late!”

Before Spark could bound out of the room, Lillycrop grabbed his arm. “Wait.”

“Unhand me!”

She obliged. “Okay. But since I’m driving, we’re not going anywhere until you explain to me how you can look at all this and think ‘poison’?”

Spark rolled his eyes. “I had hoped they would partner me with someone who had at least a passing familiarity with my methods, but since they have not, I will make this fast: first, observe the victim’s nostrils – note the faint greenish tint? That is clearly the residue of oximulstiorus – a highly lethal poison. Second, look carefully at that spot on the far wall, next to the poster of the kitten wearing a Viking helmet. There you can see the outline of where the ornamental sword now sticking from the victim’s chest once rested. Obviously, this man was poisoned and then, in pain and confusion, staggered into that wall where the ironically displayed sword fell and pierced him through his chest. But be assured, the poison is what killed him - not the irony. Must I continue?”

“But the bullets! He’s been shot at least ten times.”

“Irrelevant. If I had to guess, I would suspect the janitor or somebody who had recently acquired a handgun saw the dead body and decided to test his new weapon on a human body.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” Spark turned to Doctor Graebel. “Can you please send for the janitor?”

Doctor Graebel made a quick call on his cell phone. Momentarily, a scruffy man entered the lab carrying a mop. He wore a baseball hat with the words “cold dead hands” embroidered on the bill.

“Did you shoot this man?” Lillycrop demanded.

The janitor didn’t immediately reply. He shuffled his feet and said, “Who wants to know?”

“Damnit, man!” Spark erupted. “Stop being obtuse and just admit it. You shot this man to test your new gun, didn’t you?”

“…maybe…”

Lethbridge Spark made an exaggerated ‘ta da!’ motion then said to Lillycrop, “Can we go now?”

“Errrr,” she said, stepping towards the janitor. “You expect us to believe that you saw a dead body in here and decided to throw some bullets into it just to see what would happen?”

“That’s not illegal, is it? I mean, he was already dead. And it was a brand-new gun.”

“Of course not,” Spark said. “You can go.”

“Whoa,” Lillycrop said. “I’m pretty sure it is illegal.”

“Oh, let the parking police handle it! Don’t you understand yet? We’re dealing with a master criminal. Seconds wasted will be counted as the bodies of the dead when Professor D’eraj sets his evil machination loose upon the world! We must away!”

“No,” Lillycrop stated. She chose a chair and sat down, arms folded.

“No?” Spark bent low to look at her, eye-to-eye “No? No, what? What do you mean no?”

“No.” Lillycrop repeated. “I’m not going anywhere. Not until you explain to me what’s really going on here.”

“Aha,” Spark stood to his full height, well over six feet tall. Once again, he looked down that incredible nose at his partner. “I see. Well, perhaps THIS will change your mind.”

From his coat pocket, Spark brought forth a small biscuit shaped like a bone. He held it in his palm and waved it beneath Lillycrop’s chin. “Who wants to go for a car ride now?” he asked. “Who’s a good boy?”

***

Doctor Graebel stood next to Lethbridge Spark handing him tissue after tissue from a Kleenex box. Lethbridge took each one, held it to his nose, and loudly blew great wads of snot and dog-biscuit into them. Both men eyed Lillycrop pensively.

She smiled.

Spark finished blowing his nose with a magnificent trumpeting sound, wiping at his lip vigorously. He unfolded the tissue to look at the result, frowned, and then lifted his chin with all the dignity he could muster and said, "That was unnecessary."

Lillycrop shrugged.

"Indeed," Spark continued, transferring the stack of soggy tissues to the waste-bin, "I should not have called you 'boy'; but that remark is not offensive enough to provoke violence and…. What are you so happy about?" he snapped.

Lillycrop giggled. "I just… I just didn't think the whole thing would fit! Right up your nose!"

"Obviously it crumbled upon impact with the cartilage," Spark sniffled. "The actual volume of one of those biscuits – reduced from its frivolous shape – isn't very large and could well be expected to fit in any average sized nostril."

"Whatever," Lillycrop said. "That big ol' biscuit fit right on up there with room left over for five or six snausages as well."

"How very droll," Spark said. "Having sport with me because of my physical appearance. I suppose then you will just laugh at the innumerable corpses that pile up because of your obstinacy." Next, he mimicked her with a high, girlish falsetto voice, "*Oh look at all the stupid, ugly dead. Ha ha ha! Too bad they can't be as alive and pretty as me. Hee hee hee!*"

"Knock it off." Lillycrop didn't like being mocked. "You've been talking all this bull about master criminals and mortal danger but haven't said a damned thing that makes any sense. You know what I think? I think you're crazy."

"Cray….? Crazy?" Spark put the back of his hand to his forehead and paced the room, muttering to himself. He exhaled a deep breath then hurried to the side of Doctor Graebel and wrapped an arm around the man's shoulders.

"Doctor Graebel, do you see that young woman over there?" Spark pointed at Lillycrop. "Well, she just called me crazy. Now I already know she hasn't read my books or studied my methods so I can forgive her for thinking me eccentric, but crazy? No. I'm not crazy. But I am very well read. And as soon as I heard the victim's name – Spencer Dayton, correct?"

Doctor Graebel nodded.

"The same Spencer Dayton who was recently published in *The Journal of Arcane Science*?"

"Oh yes!" Doctor Graebel said. "That's right; he placed an article there just last month."

"Maybe you could tell the young lady what his article was about."

“Well,” Doctor Graebel started, “It was all rather silly. One of Spencer’s side projects was developing an airborne chemical which would automatically increase the size of an entire species of plant or animal. Silly, however, because the increase in size wasn’t significant – less than 1% - and the chemical would only work on one specific plant or animal family. Rather useless, in the scheme of things.”

“Useless, you say? Useless!” Spark took off again, pacing the perimeter of the room with his hands clasped behind his back. “Oh, useless. Yes, useless….”

Spark stopped suddenly and pointed at Lillycrop. “Okay, Miss Smartypants. Perhaps you can think of one specific family of animal which, even if it were oh-so-slightly increased to, say, 1% more in size – could tear asunder the very foundation of this planet and destroy all life on earth as we know it?”

Lillycrop raised one shoulder. “Mormons?” she offered.

“Wrong!” Spark raged. “Glib and offensive! No, my dear, the true answer is right. Under. Your. Nose!”

“…under YOUR nose maybe…” Lillycrop muttered, but Spark had already started to move. He flung himself across the room and used an arm to sweep off one of the tables, knocking glass and metal to the floor with a terrible cacophony of breakage.

“Here!” he smashed a finger against the tabletop. “Right here! What do you see?”

Lillycrop and Doctor Graebel approached, gingerly stepping over the broken glass.

“Oh dear,” Doctor Graebel clucked his tongue, looking at where Spark was pointing. A line of bugs darted around the finger, confused now that their path was broken. “Sugar ants. They exterminate every so often, but those little buggers always seem to find their way back.”

Spark snorted derisively then turned to Lillycrop and arched an eyebrow.

“What?” she replied. “Yeah. Ants. So? What?”

“I’m very disappointed in both of you,” Spark said. “These are ants, yes, sugar ants BUT! If either of you knew what those two round orbs in your faces called EYES are good for, you would notice that they are SLIGHTLY LARGER than your average sugar ant.”

He pushed his thumb nail next to one of the ants as a measuring stick. “See? This fellow here is at least 17 millimeters. The average sugar ant shouldn’t get any larger than 15. Don’t you see?”

“Oh my God!” Doctor Graebel exclaimed, his voice a near-panic shriek. He scrambled to the adjacent table and grabbed a colorful bag. Sugar ants were crawling all over it. “They’ve gotten into the gummy bears!” The Doctor used his hands to wipe bugs off the bag.

Spark shook his head and calmly paced the room, pointing towards lines of ants which, until now, had gone unnoticed. “Ants outnumber humans on this planet,” he explained as he continued the tour, “Something like for every one human life, there are 3.5 million corresponding ants. Anywhere people live; ants are there as well; building an incredible

network of tunnels and hives just below the surface of our human world." Spark gingerly touched his finger to the wall and came away with a single ant. He held it up for all to see. "One ant? Nothing." He brought his fingers together, crushing the ant. "Insignificant. A line of ants?" he stood next to such an example that reached from floor to ceiling. "More formidable, yes?" He started smooshing the ants using both hands, slapping the wall frantically, here and there using an elbow or a foot. When he'd finished, out of breath, he sank to the floor and said from a seated position; "Even after all that…. Even after that… Look, some of the ants are still alive. Nevertheless. A line of ants is manageable.

"Now think about the colony that sprouted all the ants in the room. Think, and understand that these ants-" he swept his hand around "-are but a small part of that colony. In fact, if the entire colony were represented here, this floor would be a living carpet of ants. The walls and ceiling too.

"How would you deal with that, hmm? More importantly, how would you deal with it suddenly increasing in size by 1%?"

Spark fixed his intense eyes on Lillycrop. She blinked. "What? Seriously?" Spark nodded. "Raid," she answered. "Definitely Raid. Maybe sprinkle some Andro around the yard. You know, like a SANE person would deal with it."

"Poisons!" Spark shot to his feet. "Of course, poisons! Why didn't I think of tha-" Spark stopped suddenly and slapped his hand over his mouth. He rolled his eyes at Lillycrop, took his hand down, and whispered. "These poisons won't harm us, right? We can gobble as much of these poisons as we want without harm, correct? Because if every ant on the planet suddenly increased in size by 1%, the ground under your feet would turn into a river of chomping, wrathful ants. The concrete foundations of your homes and buildings would rise up and crack; walls would tumble down, roofs collapse. Our food supplies – livestock and grain – would be irreparably decimated in hours, perhaps minutes. Aardvarks would soon become lazy and obese. Indeed, to survive this ant-apocalypse we would have to immediately replace the atmosphere of this planet – the very air we breathe – with these poisons. You're okay with that?"

"Sure," Lillycrop said. "In fact, I think they've already done it in Texas."

"Bah!" Spark dismissed her with a dramatic wave of his hand. "Hopelessly facile! Clearly, I cannot expect you to CARE about your job, but forthwith I demand that you at least DO your job. And right now, your job is to drive me to my next destination – the hunt for Mad Professor D'eraj begins! We must away!"

Spark fled the room, leaping over the inconvenient corpse of Spencer Dayton on his way out.

Lillycrop sighed. "Errrr," she said, "that dude is nuttier than a squirrel's fruitcake, right Doctor Graebel? Doctor Graebel?"

But the good doctor did not hear. He had set up a temporary workstation and was busy using highly specialized, expensive lenses and robotic equipment to carefully pluck tiny

brown specs from a series of rainbow-colored gummy bears. Despite herself, Lillycrop worried that those specs were *slightly larger* than they should be.

Chapter Two: Professor D'eraj Pato DelMuerte

If you were to ask Professor D'eraj Pato DelMuerte why he wanted to slightly increase the size of every ant on the planet earth, he would say – "Because in the resulting confusion, bank vaults would be torn asunder, and I could simply walk in and take all the money I could want." Then he would stab you with a hypodermic needle. If you lived through the stabbing and continued the conversation with a follow up question about why he would even need money after all life on earth is destroyed by mutant ants, he would say – "Because money…." Then he would stab you over and over again until your tongue grew too thick with poison to ask any more questions.

For you see, Professor D'eraj Pato DelMuerte is quite mad.

Also, lazy. Much too lazy to build a rocket for delivering the mutating chemical into the Earth's atmosphere, so he decided to see if NASA would allow him access to one of theirs.

First stop: The Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas.

The parking lot was near empty when D'eraj pulled in with his Honda Odyssey van – only a few beat up cars in the back spots and one rust-colored scooter leaned against the wall next to the entrance. D'eraj checked his watch – 10:25 am. Too early for lunch. Where was everybody? He stopped to consider: was today one of those annoying Federal holidays? Arbor day or Adopt-a-highway day? Some nonsense where only bankers and Federal employees get to take off work? Nothing came to mind. And he wasn't going to get any answers in the parking lot, that's for sure.

D'eraj retrieved a box from the back of the van – black metal, the size of a carry-on suitcase, adorned with biohazard, demon-skull, and sexy women silhouette stickers. The words "BEWARE!" had been sloppily spray-painted in neon green across the front. D'eraj sighed with satisfaction as he hefted the box into his arms and walked towards the front doors.

No receptionist greeted him in the lobby. There were no chairs. One dead potted plant stood in a corner, piss-yellow leaves un-vacuumed around its base. Faded rectangles on the wall indicated where pictures or certificates used to hang.

"Hello?" D'eraj called out. "Anybody here?"

His voice echoed down the halls.

***

45 minutes later D'eraj found life. He kicked open a set of swinging double doors giving access to a large, non-descript room where less than twenty people sat around on cheap plastic chairs and uncomfortable benches. They lazily eyeballed D'eraj standing there in the doorway; panting, sweating, exhausted from hauling his large metal box around, and then went back to whatever it was they had been doing before the interruption – playing solitaire, clipping coupons, dozing.

“Who….” D’eraj wheezed, catching his breath. “Who is in charge here?”

Silence. Then somebody snorted.

“I demand to speak to someone in charge!” D’eraj bellowed.

From across the room, somebody raised a hand. Then he extended his middle finger.

This got a few laughs from the rest of the room.

D’eraj put the box down and sat on it, wiping his brow. After a moment, an older lady in a white science-smock approached.

“Are you in charge?” D’eraj asked. She shook her head.

“No, but I guess I have seniority. Meaning I’m the oldest. Anyway, what do you want? No, forget I asked. I don’t care. You wouldn’t have a pocket calculator with you? Maybe” – her eyes glowed and she licked her lips – “a scientific calculator? That graphs?”

“No.”

“Too bad,” she visibly deflated. “Those are better than money around here.” She sighed. “They took all our computers.”

“What is this place?” D’eraj asked. “What happened here?”

“Budget cuts.”

Just then a siren went off. From the ceiling a large Obama head descended. Its mouth opened revealing a flashing red police light. “Whoop whoop whoop!” the siren wailed.

The lady pointed to an electronic chart on the far wall. Above the chart read “STILL EMPLOYED”. Underneath those words were about fifteen names lit up in red letters. One of the names started flickering then went black. The siren stopped and the head ascended.

A young man barked out a sarcastic laugh then stood up, hands clasped over his head like he’d just one a prize-fight. Around the room people started singing; “Na na na na. Na na na na. Hey Hey Hey. Goodbye.”

The lady sitting next to D’eraj started singing too.

“Na na na na. Na na na na. Hey Hey Hey. Goodbye.”

The young man jogged around the room, tapping the hands of his co-workers as if taking a victory lap. He stopped at the door, bowed with a flourish, and then was gone.

“GOOO-OOOOD-BYE!” the singing ended.

D’eraj picked up his box and followed the young man out.

Try try again: The Ames Research Center in San Jose, California.

It was a study in contrasts: the Director of The Ames Research Center, Dr. Robert Brewer, looked like a great man – distinguished, fit, stylish and smart. A full head of hair, slightly grey around the temples; rectangular eyeglasses that accentuated the sharp, blue eyes in

his handsome face; even his lab coat had been custom tailored to accommodate his broad shoulders while tapering in to fit snugly around his narrow waist. His smile made you feel secure and confident that this man knew what he was doing.

Sitting across the desk from Dr. Brewer, Professor D'eraj looked like a toad that somehow grew arms and legs. He was squat, flabby, with a bald head save for a few strands of dirty dishwater hair hanging over his ears. His eyeglasses were huge with thick black rims that covered most of his ugly face. He wore black socks with sandals and Bermuda shorts under his lab coat. His smile made you feel uneasy and slightly nauseous.

And yet, as they sat across from each other, both men were, in fact, smiling. Like two images in a very messed up funhouse mirror.

"I think we can come to an arrangement," Dr. Brewer said. "Yes, I think we can come to a very satisfactory arrangement indeed."

Professor D'eraj giggled and squirmed in his seat. He shot a hand across the desktop and Dr. Brewer shook it vigorously.

"Thank you, sir. You are a scholar and a gentleman!" Professor D'eraj beamed.

"It is my pleasure. We pride ourselves on thinking out of the box here at Ames. The only bad science, we say, is science untried."

Professor D'eraj's jaw dropped. He'd never heard that before but, hoo boy! was it great! He considered adopting it as his personal motto.

"There are only a few things we have to consider before undertaking this experiment. First – you say that when we launch this box of your into space, it will explode releasing a chemical that will increase the size of every ant on earth, correct?"

"Mmm hmmm."

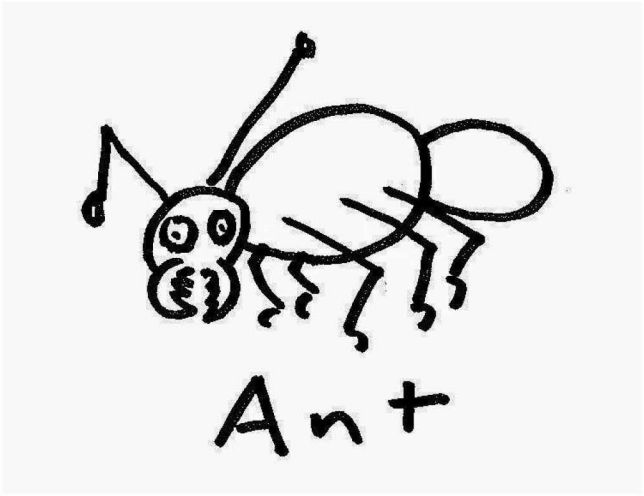
"So will this explosion damage the rocket?"

Professor D'eraj blinked. "Certainly probably," he said.

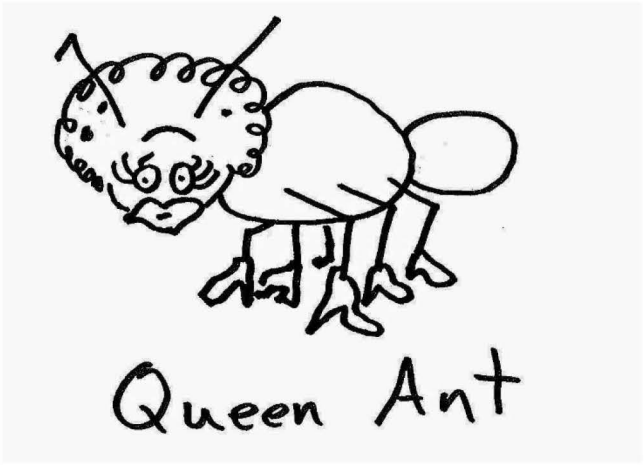
Dr. Brewer shrugged. "We can work with that. Next, when you say it will increase the size of every ant – there won't be any ants that are excluded from this effect? Black ants, red ants…. Brown ants? They'll all be increased in size?"

"Yes, uh-huh."

"Alternate lifestyle ants? They'll be increased in size as well?"



The Professor stopped to think about this for a moment.



“Yes,” he decided. “All ants. No exceptions.”

“Grand!” Dr. Brewer exclaimed. “One last question – when you say a slight increase in size… this won’t cause undue obesity in the ants, will it?”

Again, the Professor took a moment to deliberate.

“No,” he said. “This will not cause obesity in ants.”

“Well then,” Dr. Brewer waved his hand over Professor D’eraj’s proposal that lay scattered over the desk – pages of college lined paper covered with handwritten scrawls and doodles of robots and goblins. “Everything seems in order. All I need from you is a check and we can get started.”

“A check?”

“Mmmm. Ten Billion dollars should cover it.”

“TEN BILLION!” D’eraj shouted. “If I had that kind of money, I wouldn’t need an army of killer ants in the first place!”

“Why, if you think that’s too steep, we can always work out a payment schedule. Write me a check for one billion today, then-“

But the Doctor was speaking to an empty chair. Professor D’eraj had scooped up his papers and gone, muttering “…kill you all…” under his breath on his way out.

Once more into the breach: The Kennedy Space Center, Florida

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” the center’s administrator, Dr. Douglas, said. “Explain it to me again – how will this prove Man Made Global Warming?”

“For the one hundredth time,” an exhausted Professor D’eraj said, “Nothing. Not one damned thing. This experiment has absolutely nothing – zero, nada, bupkiss – to do with proving Man Made Global Warming. Nothing.”

Dr. Douglas sighed. He removed his glasses and rubbed his face. Then he ran fingers through his snow-white hair. “I just don’t get it,” he picked up some of Professor D’eraj’s papers and frowned at them. “How again does this prove Man Made Global Warming?”

Professor D'eraj ground his teeth. He pushed his hands onto the desktop until the fingers flared red. He spoke succinctly, slowly, as if trying to communicate with a moron. "The. Experiment. Doesn't. Prove. Man. Made. Global. Warming."

"Let me get this straight," Dr. Douglas set the papers down. "You are a scientist, correct?"

"Yes," D'eraj said.

"And you want to do this experiment, correct?"

"Yes."

"And the results of this experiment will prove Man Made Global Warming, right?"

"NO!"

Dr. Douglas clucked his tongue. "Well, I just don't understand…."

"To hell with Man Made Global Warming!" Professor D'eraj lost his composure. "Man Made Global Warming is stupid compared to a world overrun by mutant ants! I don't care about Man Made Global Warming!"

All the blood left Dr. Douglas' face, and he reached for the phone with a shaky hand. He pushed the intercom button and said, "Would you please send in Dr. Blade and Dr. Payne?"

"I just need access to a rocket," Professor D'eraj continued. "Just one little rocket. That's all I need. Just to blast this stuff into space. Is that too much to ask? One little rocket?"

The door slammed open. Two very large scientists entered the room. One had a red scar on his wide chin. The other was missing an eye. Dr. Douglas pointed at Professor D'eraj.

"He doesn't believe in Man Made Global Warming," Dr. Douglas said softly, almost a whisper.

"Wha-?" Professor D'eraj started but couldn't finish. His mouth was roughly shut by Dr. Payne's heavy fist. The other fist flashed in the air and Professor D'eraj's world suddenly turned black.

***

D'eraj Pato DelMuerte came to in an unfinished basement – all exposed pipes, concrete, and dripping water. He was bound to a wooden chair; hands tied behind his back. A workstation had been set up in the corner and Professor D'eraj saw two scientists – not Dr.'s Blade and Payne, but normal sized men – accessing a computer. He overheard their conversation.

"So, this Professor DelMuerte; he is a scientist then?" The bald one asked.

The one sitting at the workstation wearing a bowtie said, "Yes, but it says here he belongs to the subset of scientists known as 'mad'."

"Doesn't matter. He is a scientist. He's on the books as a scientist."

"Hey!" Professor D'eraj shouted. "What is the meaning of this? I demand – "

He stopped talking when he spotted movement from the corner of his eye. Dr.'s Blade and Payne were there, waiting by the door. Dr. Payne cracked his knuckles and Professor D'eraj shut up.

The bald scientist left the computer and stood before Professor D'eraj. "So," he said. "You don't believe in Man Made Global Warming?"

"I never said that," D'eraj corrected him. "I said I didn't CARE about Man Made Global Warming."

"Oh, that's better." Dr. Bald nodded towards the corner. Dr. Payne came forward and punched Professor D'eraj on the side of the head. Professor D'eraj cried out in pain.

Dr. Bald returned to the workstation. "What else?" he asked the other scientist.

"No public statement about Man Made Global Warming one way or the other." Dr. Bowtie punched some keys. "Nothing."

"Has he been published? Anything in the scientific journals under his name?"

Dr. Bowtie typed some more. "No. The only publications under his name are letters to the editor of DIY home improvement magazines – This Old House, HGTV; like that."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. Word play mostly. For example, one of his letters reads: *I never thought I would replace my toilet, but after reading your article on simple bathroom renovations, I decided to give it a whirl*. And another: *Thank you for the informative article on electrical wiring. When I learned how much money I might be losing from improperly installed electrical outlets, I was shocked.'"*

The air in the room grew oppressive. Professor D'eraj could feel the waves of hate radiating towards him.

"I…I'm a lover of language," the Professor explained.

Dr. Payne stepped forward and hit him on the other side of his head. D'eraj didn't complain. Even in his sick and twisted mind, he knew he'd deserved that one.

"Okay then," Dr. Bald said. "Since Dorothy Parker here hasn't published anything about it, go ahead and put it in that he does believe in Man Made Global Warming."

Dr. Bowtie nodded then typed.

When he'd finished, Dr. Bald asked. "So where does that put us now?"

"With Professor D'eraj Pato DelMuerte's opinion, now 99.98% of all scientists agree in Man Made Global Warming."

"Damnit!" Dr. Bald raged. "Professor Crichton I suppose?"

"Yes. Last seen hiding in the caves of Afghanistan. And there is still Dr. Griffin."

"Dr. Griffin? Why haven't we had him in for a… readjustment yet?"

“Well, we believe he’s actually figured out a way to turn himself invisible.”

“Dammit!” Dr. Bald motioned for Dr. Payne who came forward and cut away the rope that bound D’eraj’s hand.

D’eraj rubbed his wrists and looked around the room.

“You’re still here,” Dr. Bald said. “Why?”

“So do I get my rocket or what?” D’eraj asked.

***

Professor D’eraj stood in the miserable sun outside the Kennedy Space Center holding the pieces of his broken eyeglasses. After he’d asked for a rocket, Dr.’s Blade and Payne roughed him up, pushed him around, stomped on his glasses, took all the money from his wallet, and dragged him from the center by his feet.

“…kill them all…” D’eraj muttered, trying to piece his glasses together enough to set them on his face. Hopeless.

“Nuts to this,” D’eraj Pato DelMuerte said, chucking his glasses into a trashcan. “I’ll just go to Russia.”

LETHBRIDGE SPARK USA CANCELLED DUE TO POPULAR DEMAND

There are a few albums, not many, but some that are so special you remember when and how you acquired them. For example, Summer 1988, I was a sophomore in High School working as a maid in a Southern Illinois truck stop motel. Yup, a maid. Cleaning rooms. At a truck drivers' motel. And it was just as glamorous as you might think. And hot, too! That was the Summer when I came to realize that ice cold water is the finest beverage ever served on this planet earth. I also learned that you could buy two cubes of banana flavored laffy taffy at the checkout counter for a dime, and that was plenty fine as well.

The work was hard, tedious, and often disgusting. My first paycheck represented two weeks, 80 hours of such thankless labor, and was just about $100. I cashed it, took the ducats to the mall, hit the music store and spent the entire she-bang on Eric Clapton's Crossroads Boxed Set and Joe Jackson's double album, Live 1980/1986*. To this day, I consider that some of the best money I ever spent.*

Clapton is as Clapton does; but Live 1980/1986 was a revelation. First of all, I didn't much care for live albums (Waiting for Columbus being the exception), and there were three versions of one song - Is She Really...*- which seemed inefficient, but... Goddamnit.* Memphis*. I had to own* Memphis *and I wasn't about to put green on the* Mike's Murder soundtrack *(fuck Debra Winger). So, flush with cash, I took the chance.*

As I said; a revelation.

Years later, living in Houston, Texas, I met somebody who had seen JJ perform live at Astro World during those years. For the uninitiated, Astro World was a roller coaster amusement park for families and pimple-faced kids. They did book musical acts, but mostly oldies, classic rock, or kiddie pop. Not the type of venue for a reformed English punk pioneer with a piano.

The show JJ put on there has become something of a legend in Houston. One assumes he wasn't accustomed to performing for tweens wearing chilli stained TMNT shirts, but that didn't stop him from putting on one of the highest energy - and fun - concerts that venue had ever seen. My friend still remembers it as being one of the most happily bizarre events in rock 'n roll history: Joe Jackson at Astro World. Just tearing it up.

I hate that I missed it. But at least I have (had) the cassettes.